

Questions & Answers about communicating with children

We communicate with children long before they can talk. Communication begins as soon as a baby is born and begins to bond with parents. Families can strengthen this bond by creating a family communication system. Such a system supports family members as they share their thoughts and feelings. It also teaches family members to talk and listen to one another.

To keep your child communicating with you, step into his or her world. To learn how to do this, keep reading! In order to build healthy self-esteem, children need their parents to value their thoughts and feelings, no matter what. Ask them about their likes and dislikes. When talking to your children, stop what you are doing and listen to what they are saying. *Children will more likely listen to you if you listen to them.*

1. Why are family meetings important?

Family meetings give everyone regular times to discuss family issues. These meetings can be used to plan family activities, celebrate, and solve problems. They help families learn to work as teams. They also give children a chance to practice communication, decision-making, and problem solving skills. All family members should be able to express their feelings and ideas.

2. How can family meetings be used to solve problems?

Meetings can be used to solve family problems over chores, use of the television and sibling conflicts by following these steps:

- Identify the problem. Each family member should describe the problem and talk about how they see it.
- Think of possible solutions to the problem.
- Consider solutions to the

problem.

- Agree to try a solution (or combination of solutions) on a trial basis.
- Talk about how the solutions are working at the next family meeting.

3. I feel like I'm always negative when I talk with my 8-year-old son. "Get off the phone." "You're going to miss the bus if you don't hurry up." "Haven't you finished your homework yet?" "This room is a mess."

How can I make our communication more positive?

Parents might mean well, but these messages don't teach children responsibility; they can hurt a child's self-esteem. Stop and listen to yourself. How you say something is just as important as *what* you say. Nagging, criticizing, or threatening can be very discouraging to a child.

Encourage children to let them know that they are valued. *"I need to use the phone in five minutes."* *"Do you need any help with your homework?"* Sometimes you can communicate your meaning with a few words—*"Billy, Bus!"* Giving children choices also helps them feel

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confident. *"Would you like to start your homework before or after dinner?"* Use **I** messages like, *"I feel tired tonight and could use some help with the dishes."* Or use descriptive language to make your point. *"The jar broke. We need a broom."*

You messages are negative. *"You never help with the dishes; it's your turn tonight."* *"You broke the jar. Clean it up."* When you need to talk with him about his behavior, keep it short and to the point. Otherwise, he may learn to tune you out.

Be careful about sharing feelings with children when you are angry. Sometimes you may feel too angry to be helpful if you talk to your son right away. If this is the case, tell your son that you are angry and will talk to him once you have calmed down.

4. My 9-year-old daughter used to tell me everything. Now she tells me very little. What have I done wrong?

You have probably done nothing wrong. As children grow older, they often begin talking less with their parents. They may need time alone to sort out feelings, fear that parents will lecture them, or want to talk more with friends. It is important to spend time talking casually with your daughter. Find times when you can have each other's undivided attention. Look at your daughter while she talks and show interest in what she is saying. Ask questions that will help her talk. Show respect for what she is saying, even if you disagree with her. Remember that she has her own

point of view. This will help her feel comfortable talking to you. Try not to criticize, judge, or interrupt her while she is talking. Strive to be an approachable and understanding parent who is always willing to listen.

5. Sometimes, I feel like I'm saying the same thing over and over again to my 7-year-old son, but not really getting my point across. How can I make sure that happens?

Instead of repeating yourself, you need to find out if you have been heard. When you announce that you are leaving in five minutes and your son does not answer, ask him what you have just said. When he tells you what he heard, you can answer, *"Now that I know you know, I won't have to mention it again."*

6. When I ask my 10-year-old son what he does at school each day, he usually answers "Nothing." I want to keep up with what is happening in his life, but I get replies like this. What can I do?

A lot of times, kids just don't know how to answer this question. It can be tough for younger children to remember and sum up what they did all day. Also, as children become teens, they usually say very little about what they do all day (see question 4, above).

Instead of asking your son general questions about his day as soon as he comes home, give him time to relax. You can ask

questions that are more direct later after he has had time to unwind from school. Instead of "What did you do today?" ask questions like, "What are you studying in math now?" "How did your chemistry experiment go?" Specific questions such as these will encourage him to talk about his day. Another suggestion is to use newsletters sent home from teachers to gain information, and give you topics to discuss with your son. Also, be sure to make yourself available when he does want to talk with you about school.

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